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ABSTRACT

David H. Olson's circumplex model identifies 16 types of family systems based on the dimensions of cohesion, adaptability, and communication. This paper relates the circumplex model to Native American familial structures. The historical Native American family was a multigenerational extended family with no desire for change, a description apparently inconsistent with the model's requirements of nuclear and dynamic qualities in the balanced "normal" family. Nevertheless, historic Native Americans did live in a structurally open and balanced familial network that had provisions to adapt to crises. Family adaptations forced by non-Native coercive acts resulted in extreme family disruption and near dissolution. The resulting modern Native family types match circumplex model types to a degree: (1) the modern traditional Native family, similar to the model's rigidly enmeshed type, attempts to retain its cultural heritage through extreme family closeness and resistance to change; (2) the nontraditional Native family, similar to the rigidly disengaged type, is usually urban and bicultural, with little closeness between members; (3) the pantraditional family displays moderately high levels of cohesion and moderately low levels of adaptability in its attempt to return to historic family structures, and most closely resembles the model's structurally connected type. The model views the first two types as dysfunctional, and the latter as open and balanced. This report contains 41 references, and recommendations for therapists counseling Native American families. (SV)

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Native American Family

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The Applicability of Olson's Circumplex Model
to Native American Families

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Abstract

The determination of any congruence between Olson et al.'s Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems and Native American familial structures is dependent upon the understanding of Native American history and culture. Current Native American family types--traditional, nontraditional, and pantraditional--are the results of coercive dissolution practices. These three family types can be matched with Circumplex Model family types with certain qualifications. Recommendations are presented to enhance the therapeutic efficacy of family therapy with Native American families.

The Applicability of Olson's Circumplex Model
to Native American Families

David H. Olson, Douglas H. Sprenkle, and Candyce Russell (1979, 1980, 1983) have proposed a "circumplex model" to identify 16 types of family systems based on the family dimensions of cohesion, adaptability, and communication. Although Olson and his associates' research thus far has not yielded a specific match between a family system type and the family's presenting symptoms, these researchers have expressed hope that eventually methodological improvements would permit such a match-up. Given their research focus, this paper will address which types of Olson's family system types would be most likely to characterize current Native American families.

The determination of any congruence between Olson's Circumplex Model and Native American familial structures is dependent upon an understanding of Native American history and culture. A concurrent variable exists in the influence non-Native Americans have had on the historical Native American family. For example, coercive acts, including the forced migrations to governmental reservations from traditional lands, subsistent living on poor land reservations, forced sterilization practices to stem population growth, compulsory removal of children from Native American homes, and forced relocations from reservations to alien urban cultures, have practically destroyed the historical Native American familial structure (Herring, 1988). These coercive influences have served to drastically alter the familial structure of the Native American.

In order to accurately assess current Native American family types by Olson et al.'s Circumplex Model, we begin by providing a brief overview of the model itself.

Overview of the Circumplex Model

Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell (1979, 1980, 1983) have developed a model claimed to be useful in the treatment of dysfunctional families, as well as in providing a research and assessment framework. This model emphasizes the three integrative and associative properties of cohesion, adaptability, and communication. Olson and his colleagues define cohesion as the degree of personal autonomy a person experiences within the family system. This dimension includes qualities such as emotional bonding, coalitions, independence, boundaries, time, space, friends, decision-making, interests, and recreation (Olson, 1986).

Adaptability is the ability of a marital/family system to alter its power structure roles, relationships, and rules in response to situational and developmental stress. This dimension encompasses positive and negative feedback, morphogenesis and morphostasis, the family power structure, negotiation stages, relationship rules, and role relationships.

The communication dimension is concerned with how effectively family members relate to one another and to the family as a unit. Communication also involves how the family members react to crises individually and collectively. In essence, communication functions as a facilitative dimension. Cohesion and adaptability each form

axes within the Circumplex Model, and communication serves as a facilitative catalyst, capable of moving families along both axes.

Place Figure 1 about here

The Circumplex Model differentiates among 16 family types. The distinctions are based on two dimensions: (a) how well the family members experience and balance the extreme of being independent from and connected to their families; (b) how well the family members adapt to crises and threats to family homeostasis. Balanced families (i.e., flexibly separated, flexibly connected, structurally separated, and structurally connected) are balanced on the cohesion and adaptability dimensions and represent the most functional family types (Olson, 1977).

Extreme family types (i.e., chaotically disengaged, chaotically enmeshed, rigidly disengaged, rigidly enmeshed) display very high or very low levels of adaptability and cohesion. These family types represent extremes on both axes and describe the most dysfunctional families.

The remaining eight family types represent the mid-range type. These families display extremes on one axis and balance on the other axis. Olson et al. consider families who are not balanced on at least one axis, as dysfunctional. Yet, the family system is considered dynamic and can change its type if the system is willing and able to change.

Normal families represent only a narrow spectrum of the range of behavior on cohesion and adaptability. Very few "normal" families legitimately fall into the extreme types (Olson et al., 1983). In essence, moderate levels of cohesion and adaptability seem to be associated with better family functioning.

Research studies concerning the Circumplex Model have reinforced and substantiated its validity as a therapeutic family model. Studies of alcoholic and chemically dependent families have shown a significantly higher level of extreme families compared to non-dependent, non-alcoholic families (Killorin & Olson, 1984; Olson & Killorin, 1985a, 1985b). Also, Clarke's (1984) study of problem families concluded that a higher level of extreme family types exist among neurotic families, schizophrenic families, and families involved in therapy. Rodick, Henggeler, and Hanson (1986) studied 58 mother-son dyads from father-absent families in which half had an adolescent juvenile offender and the other half had adolescents with no history of arrest or psychiatric referral. Results indicated that 93 percent of the families were mid-range or extreme family types. Other research has indicated that balanced families possess more positive communication skills than do extreme families (Barnes & Olson, 1982; Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985; Olson, Portner, & Bell, 1982; Rodick et al., 1986).

The preceding section described the basic tenets of the Circumplex Model. To establish a knowledge base for a meaningful comparison between the model and Native American familial

structures, an overview of the latter is presented next.

Native American Familial Characteristics and Structures

The historical (i.e., pre-20th century) Native American family was very different from non-Native American family units. The unquestioned leader of the Native American society was not the local chieftain or tribal council, but the family (White, 1979). Native American families existed as a flexible and extensive group. The Native American family was structurally open and operated in a village-like atmosphere. Native American families consisted of many households representing close relatives along both vertical and horizontal bloodlines (Tooker, 1983). The Native American nuclear family--or the slightly larger kin clique with a nuclear family serving as its core--existed as the primary social, economic, and political segment of Native American society. This nuclear family basically resulted from the Native American's historical culture of being unable to control their seasonal movements in order to permit any stable social aggregations larger than the extended family (Tooker, 1983; White, 1979).

The conjugal family, combining members of both blood lines, represented the basic pattern on which the total Native American life depended. Tooker (1983) further described each marriage as combining the members of two maternal lines, to each of which the chieftain represented an "uncle." The birth of children to the "sisters" provided junior members; the children of "brothers" were played by numerous relatives. Terms such as father, mother, sister,

brother, son, uncle, and aunt were far more widely applied in the historical Native American families than in non-Native American families (White, 1979).

Most social talk was consciously conceived as among kin of different categories, just as if they were members of the family. A series of intricate relationships operated inside the family--verbal/physical teasing, joking, and silly horseplay. Avoidance customs and prohibitions ranged from not using personal names, not eating close to certain kin, not talking to relatives directly, and not gazing at relatives full in the face (Lame Deer, 1972). In addition, migratory Native Americans were incorporated into their hosts' familial structures. The family and tribe were not merely self-perpetuating through the birth of new members to replace those who have died or were killed, but retained their original composition via a symbolic rebirth of the same individuals.

Red Horse, Lewis, Feit, and Decker (1978) described Native American natural grandparents as official and symbolic leaders in the Native American extended, multigenerational familial system. Grandparental roles represented active processes validated by the Native American family's children and their parents. This close-knit family structure, and the Native American emphasis to keep family matters within the family, reinforced the resilience of the families, often bolstered in a crisis by this same extended family network (Lewis & Ho, 1979).

Extended family networks represent a universal pattern among

current Native American families as well (Red Horse et al., 1978). This pattern can be observed in the three distinct family lifestyles found in today's Native American families, on and off reservations. These three lifestyles, described below, are traditional, non-traditional, and pantraditional. Each type retains Native American core values yet represents different social contexts.

The traditional family overtly attempts to adhere to culturally defined styles of living. The adoption of non-Native American customs and habits is not prohibited, but the family's basic "Indianness" is not rejected under any circumstances. For example, this family type may accept modern conveniences such as appliances, vehicles, and health aids. This family type cannot relate well to human service professionals and much prefers to ignore mainstream social conventions. The Native American traditional family seldom responds to any social prescriptions which depart from their customary practices. This family's goal is to exist as long as possible in the pre-20th century style of Native American families, without attracting the attention of non-Native American outsiders.

The nontraditional family type appears to have adopted many aspects of non-Native American family styles. This family type basically represents a bicultural family. These families are able to relate to professionals and are able to accept and cope with contemporary social prescriptions. Notwithstanding, this Native American family retains the rudimentary elements of the traditional Native American family style.

The pantraditional family type overtly struggles to redefine and reconfirm a previously lost cultural style. This cultural style would include a return to the Native American's past culture of nomadism, living off the land, and isolation from non-Native American society. This family type advocates the return of all historically owned lands to Native American ownership. To attain their goals, this family type would resort to militancy and violence. These families reject all human service professionals and any social attempts to alter their style of living. This family type generally rejects and ignores non-Native American ideas, customs, and contributions (Herring, 1988; Red Horse et al., 1978).

The Circumplex Model as Culturally Relevant

Olson et al. (1979, 1980, 1983) purport that the Circumplex Model is culturally relevant when expectations of family members match, even if the expectations are extreme on one or both of the axes (i.e., cohesion and adaptability). Their claim is that families will function as normal families if all family members are satisfied with their expectations. Thus, the family serves as its own norm base which necessitates measuring the family satisfaction of each family member (Olson & Wilson, 1982).

Incongruences between Native American Familial Structures and the Circumplex Model

Olson et al.'s Circumplex Model is culturally relevant to the Native American family if family members are satisfied with their familial expectations. However, an initial incongruence arises in

the differentiation between past and present Native American familial systems. The historical Native American family would display very positive family member satisfaction. However, current Native American families do not represent the historical Native American family structure because of documented coercive influences exerted mainly by the federal government and non-Native Americans. The historical Native American extended kinship family has virtually disappeared and its remnants appear today mainly in reservation families, and infrequently in nonreservation Native American families (Herring, 1988; Red Horse et al., 1978).

The Native American family system, in its present state of coerced dissolution, conflicts with a second tenet of the Circumplex Model. A prerequisite for normal family functioning according to the model is the presence of a dynamic and adaptable family system. However, a family's ability to change is often tempered by the desire of the family to change (Adler, 1985; Ambert, 1982, 1984; Richardson, 1973; Rosenstiel, 1983; Unger, 1977). The historical Native American family did not desire to change. Rather, the Native American family types of today are products of a forced change without the benefit of a democratic and voluntary willingness to allow or seek that change (Byler, 1977; Herring, 1988; Unger, 1977). Therefore, the Native American family does not relate to this tenet of the model.

The Circumplex Model's assumption that a balanced family is based on the nuclear-family structure is contrary to the Native American

extended familial structure and thus represents a third incongruence with Native American familial types. Many studies have indicated that the concept of the nuclear family is woefully inadequate and very misleading when used as a basis for an understanding of the dynamics of family functioning as a guide for therapeutic intervention (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Metcoff & Whitaker, 1982; Uzoka, 1979). The Native American familial structure is certainly not nuclear which implies that Native American families are not "normal," according to the model.

Native American families have more in common with the "macrosystem" of Bronfenbrenner (1979) which is based on a broader cultural or subcultural context, or the "suprasystem" family as described by Metcoff and Whitaker (1982). The Native American family can be described best as a modified extended family in which, while not necessarily sharing a common household, family members live close to each other and exchange not only tangible resources, but also intangibles such as help and assistance (Adams, 1970; Litwak, 1960, 1965).

Matching Native American Familial Structures with Circumplex Model Family Types

Despite our belief that some fundamental issues make the application of the Circumplex Model to Native American families problematic at best, an attempt will be made to match Olson et al.'s family types with Native American family types. As no data currently exist on this matter, our approach will be logical rather

than empirical.

The present-day Native American family systems include the traditional, nontraditional, and pantraditional family types. Each of the three types compares somewhat favorably with at least one family type from the Circumplex Model. For example, the traditional Native American family type seems to adhere most closely to Olson's rigidly enmeshed family type. Regrettably, this Native American family type represents one of the least functional of Olson's 16 family types (Olson, 1977). This family type is characterized by extremely high cohesion (enmeshment) and extremely low adaptability (rigidity).

Friedman, Utada, and Morrissey (1987) described this family type as displaying extreme emotional closeness and family loyalty. The family members are very dependent on each other, and parent-child coalitions are frequent. Times spent together are maximized and decisions are effected subject to the wishes of the entire family. Family friends are preferred over limited individual friends. The joint interests of the family are mandated. The above characteristics depict an enmeshed family on the cohesion axis.

This family's ability to change is very limited. The family's leadership is authoritarian with limited negotiation. Family rules and roles are strictly defined and strictly enforced with rigid consequences for any rule disobedience or role changes. For example, Olson et al. (1979) claimed that this extreme family type might be functional for the care of an infant, but this family

would be less functional when the infant entered into the unpredictability of adolescence.

The traditional Native American family closely adheres to their culturally defined styles of living. The varied Native American tribal groups display this "definition" in relation to their particular tribal dictates, and strongly reject mainstream social prescriptions on their behaviors and living style.

The nontraditional Native American family type seems to most closely correspond to Olson's rigidly disengaged family type. This Native American family appears to have adopted many aspects of non-Native American styles. This family type evolved mainly from Native Americans who had migrated from reservation life to reside in urban areas and non-reservation conditions. These families attempt to exist as bicultural families in non-Native American locations and cultures.

This family type is depicted as possessing extreme emotional separateness and lack of family loyalty. A very low involvement or interaction between members is displayed in a lack of parent-child closeness. Time is rarely spent together and separate space is needed and preferred by family members. External boundaries are mainly focused outside the family with members having disparate interests and separate recreation (Friedman et al., 1987).

The pantraditional Native American family most nearly resembles Olson's structurally connected (i.e., open and balanced) family type. This Native American family type displays a moderately

high but not extreme level of cohesion, and a moderately low but not extreme level of adaptability. It incorporates a more traditional husband-dominant power structure and segregates role relationships. This Native American family type strives to return to the Native American family style of pre-European colonization.

In examining this family type along the adaptability dimension, the structurally connected family could be described as primarily authoritarian in leadership but possessing equalitarian aspects. Discipline is somewhat democratic, with predictable consequences for misbehavior. Negotiations generally are structured with parental decisions dominant. Family roles are typically stable, but may be shared. Few rule changes occur and rules are firmly enforced.

With regard to cohesion, the family generally possesses emotional closeness, with family loyalty expected. Affective interactions are encouraged and preferred. Clear sub-system boundaries with parent-child closeness exist, and joint decisions and interests are preferred. In essence, family members share many activities.

Discussion

The historical Native American family existed as a multi-generational extended family with the desire to remain as it was. This description appears inconsistent with the Circumplex Model's need for nuclear and dynamic qualities in order to be a balanced or "normal" family. Nevertheless, before the coercive actions of

non-Native Americans, Native Americans did exist in a structurally open and balanced familial network. This network further existed as a balanced family with provisions to cope and adapt to crises. Acts of coercion (e.g., forced relocations, reservation conditions, child-family separation, mission school education, etc.) presented crises into which the Native American family did not have input. Forced family adaptations to these coercive acts rendered extreme disruption and near dissolution of the historical Native American family.

The near dissolution of the historical tribal and extended family network of the Native American has resulted in the deterioration of a once open and balanced family structure to a family structure whose very existence is dependent upon the political and social dictates of non-Native American groups. This political and social dissolution is evidenced in three current Native American family types: traditional, nontraditional, and pantraditional.

These current Native American families can be described to a degree by the Circumplex Model. The traditional Native American family most closely resembles the rigidly enmeshed family type of the Circumplex Model, whereas the nontraditional Native American family type most closely matches the rigidly disengaged family type. Two Native American family types possess neither the openness nor the balance required by the Circumplex Model to be considered a normally functioning family. Whereas the traditional Native American family's members are too enmeshed to

be balanced, the nontraditional Native American family's members are too distant to be balanced. Likewise, these two family types are too rigid to be open within their familial structures. The traditional Native American family type may attempt to retain its cultural heritage through its extreme family closeness and loyalty, resulting in a dysfunctional family according to the Circumplex Model. Conversely, the nontraditional Native American family type may be attempting to be too bicultural, resulting in a lack of closeness.

The pantraditional Native American family type most closely resembles the structurally connected type and as such, is the only one of the three that the Circumplex Model appears to view in a favorable light. This Native American family type displays moderately high levels of cohesion and moderately low levels of adaptability. According to the Circumplex Model, this Native American family type is open and balanced. As this Native American family type espouses to return to the historical lifestyle of the Native American, a point might be made for the value of the open and balanced aspects of the historical Native American family. family of the historical Native American family.

Recommendations

The uniqueness of Native American's history and culture needs to be acknowledged, addressed, and incorporated by family researchers and therapists. The authors offer the following recommendations to that end. First, a positive sign of non-Native American's sincere

interest in the Native American could be reflected in a more cautious application of family theories and assessment instruments. The Native American family cannot be separated from its culture and history. Family theories and assessment instruments need to include such social and cultural factors in their attempts to evaluate the Native American's current family. The implementation of this recommendation could result in more positive treatment and understanding of Native American family functioning.

Second, psychologists, counselors, and other caregivers are encouraged to build on Native American families' strengths while helping them maintain their membership in social and tribal networks. These Native American families would remain in their natural communities in the least restrictive environment (President's Commission on Mental Health, 1978). Thus, any cultural shock or alienation might be prevented.

A third recommendation rests in the need for psychologists and other mental health practitioners to assume a more active stance in regulating the quality of psychological services to Native Americans in tribal and reservational settings. Tribal and reservational governments may be influenced to do more themselves by an enhanced initiative by mental health professionals to do more (McShane & Bloom, 1984). The federal government attempts to provide some services through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), but the local tribal and reservational leaders could likely effect more positive results. A great need exists for someone to provide the impetus

to effect a more psychologically healthy Native American family.

A final recommendation concerns the need for additional study and research regarding the current Native American family types. For example, what specific influences have resulted in the current Native American familial situations? What are the effects of some Native Americans' attempts to live biculturally? And specifically, how do these factors--and others--affect normal functioning within a familial system?

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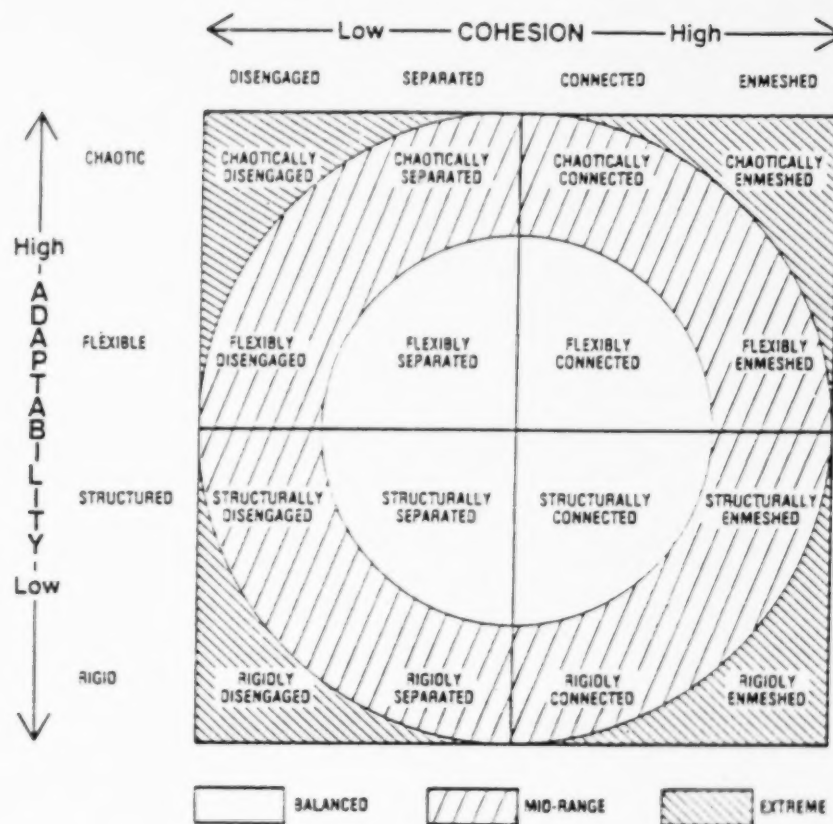
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FIGURE 1: CIRCUMPLEX MODEL: SIXTEEN TYPES OF MARITAL AND FAMILY SYSTEMS



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